

Mauna Loa Backpacking Trip September 24-September 27, 2007

Monday morning: We rose early from our slumber at the Volcanos National Park campground. We had spent several days exploring the Big Island and were sunburned from hiking the Kilauea Crater. There had been either a light rain or a very heavy dew, but our tents were soaked. We packed up our gear and tossed the tents loose into the trunk of the car. We drove up the 13 miles of one lane road to the observation point and trailhead. I pulled out the tents and dried them in the sun. I did not want to leave them balled up in a mess to get mildew during the four days we would spend on the trail. Earlier when we got our trail permit at the visitor station, one of the rangers was going on and on thrilling a visitor with a story of Pele the lava goddess. All I could think of at the time was I was not going to allow the mountain to beat me or Pele to swallow me up. I was going to conquer the mountain. We were pumped, pawing the earth with our boots and ready to hike. We were like race horses waiting for the gate to drop at the Kentucky Derby. I read the information on the sign at the trailhead briefly. It said 19 miles to the top. I had read all the information on the website, but I still did not know exactly what to expect on the trip. I felt exhilarated. We started hiking. As we climbed forward, the trail quickly disappeared and we were bouldering up the mountain. We were climbing over rocks and lava flow and following the cairns. First, we were at 7000ft. We had conquered the first signpost. Up, up, up, as we looked for the 8,000 ft signpost which took a little longer to reach. The sun went away and we were in fog, up, up, up, across the black lava, through the second gate in the fence, up to 9,000 ft and now getting tired of the uneven ground. Finally, to 10,000 ft tired but in good spirits. We entered Red Hill cabin which felt like a sanctuary in the barren environment. My son read the cabin log. One entry said, "Misery, but we finally made it!" This seemed an appropriate entry. We flopped down on the bunks and rested for awhile and had our dinner. When it got dark I went outside and walked up the hill and observed the full moon shining on the landscape. It was very, very quiet.

Tuesday Morning: In the morning, it was clear with blue skies and very beautiful. We got some water from the tank and looked out over the valley to Mauna Kea. We could see the observatories. What a fantastic sight!. Thinking that the trail would be no worse than what we just climbed and filled with testosterone, we took off to summit the mountain. The ground after Red Hill cabin quickly became extremely rough. No real trail, just walking over lava flows. We got to 11,000 ft and Dewey Cone. We went to 12,000ft and Steaming Cone. There was steam coming out of the rocks in the distance. I had hoped to see hot, red lava. By now we were resting more and breathing heavier. We were taking in lots of water and trail mix. Yet we were slowing down, and stopping more, and the route was more strenuous and extremely rough. It was getting colder and windy with a light rain, so we put on a fleece jacket and raincoat. By now we could not turn back. We were committed. It was too far back to Red Hill and too late in the day. The weather grew worse and the trail continued to go unrelentingly up. I kept scanning the ridge of the mountain looking for the top, but it just kept going up and looked like the landscape of the moon. We reached 13,000 ft and I could hardly breathe. I cracked a smile for the picture. Where was the trail junction? It was getting very windy with fog and rain. Finally we saw the trailhead about ¼ mile in the distance. It was like a landmark pointing to home. It provided hope. I turned around and told my son, "We're going to make it!" When we got to the trail junction, I was exhausted. The wind on the ridge was blowing so hard it was trying to blow the pack off my back. It was raining or was it sleeting? The sun was throwing long shadows on the

black rock. We moved away into the crater of the North Pit and out to the cabin. It was trying to get dark. The ground was extremely rough. We were played out with no breath due to the altitude. I willed myself one step after the other from one rock cairn to the other. Through the swirling mist and blowing wind, we caught sight of the cabin. What a relief ! It was like food to a famished man. When we got there my heart was trying to beat out of my chest. Thump, thump, thump. I had no appetite and felt sick. I was wet and cold. I changed my clothes and got into my sleeping bag. I couldn't eat. I could barely breathe. I was very warm and comfortable in my bunk, but my heart kept racing even though I was at rest. It felt like it was racing at 200 beats a minute. I laid in the bunk and thought I must have altitude sickness and this can kill you, but it is dark, windy, raining and I cannot go anywhere until morning. The wind was so strong it was buffeting the cabin. The windows and roof were rattling. My heart was pounding, pounding, pounding.

Wednesday Morning: In the morning, the wind had died down and now we were encapsulated in heavy thick fog. I had read somewhere not to hike in heavy fog and rain, but I needed to get off this mountain before I died on this mountain. I walked out the cabin door a short distance to the rim of the caldera and saw nothing but thick swirling fog. We packed up and started walking down. The 2.1 miles to the trail junction did not seem near as far as it had the night before. The night before it had felt like another 10 miles. We kept walking and walking and walking through the cold sleeting rain and fog. We reached 13,000 ft; then 12,000 ft. I began to feel better at 12,000 ft. We began to gain more visibility. The black lava rock and the fog misting and smoking over the rock was like Mordor in the movie Lord of the Rings. I thought Gollum would jump out and try to steal the ring from me. I looked back up the mountain to where we had been on the top of the world. I asked "How did I ever climb up there?" I answered my own question with the comment "More Braun than Brains".

Unfortunately on a mountain such as this the rock is loose and unstable everywhere. One must continually focus on every step to prevent a fall. In the midst of my mountain top dreaming, I put my foot down and it decided to go out from under me. I sharply hyper-extended my right knee as the trail went out from under me. There was no fall and no crash due to sturdy boots. I thought I was OK. My knee was painful, but I thought I could walk it out. What choice did I have? Red Hill cabin was still about 6 miles away. We continued walking and enjoyed the thorough cold soaking we got through the surreal mountain world. We arrived at Red Hill. Off with the wet clothes and on to a solid dinner and some rest.

Thursday Morning: The next day, I was pretty stiff. I felt beaten up by the trail; too much rough terrain; too much black lava rock. My knee was swollen and stiff from my slip. I put on the pack and strode off to the finish line. We were moving pretty good until 8,000 ft. The bouldering, up and over, crashing down, down, down was taking its toll. The knee was very swollen and I was starting to say bad words. My son went on ahead by himself. I kept walking determined to get off the mountain. Finally near the trailhead, we saw a tourist. He asked us had we seen his wife. He thought he might get a good picture from a vantage point on the trail. I told him he was the first person I had seen in 4 days. We had climbed Mauna Loa, the long mountain and the tallest, biggest volcano in the world. We were successful. We had made it to the top and back. I had survived. I had conquered the mountain and I had the most memorable experience of my life.